

# Religiousness, Religious Development and Spiritual Growth

- A little bit of relevant Buddhist thinking

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What does it mean to be religious? The Concise Oxford Dictionary [The New Edition for the 1990 s] defines religion as 1. the belief in a superhuman controlling power, esp. in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship... 3. a particular system of faith and worship. There are a few more. But these suffice for our purpose. Buddhism, if we go by the first definition alone, certainly does not come under the category of religion. Giving a very wide berth, however, for the two words faith and worship [under definition 3], we believe we could get Buddhism in the category of religion with considerable ease. We are also aware that there is now a noteworthy expansion of view among lexicographers on the definition of religion. Some even choose to name Buddhism as a religion. That is as it should be. The concept of a religion, in itself, has to be much wider [much more than what people thought a religion to be a century ago], generous and more understanding. It will also be seen that this is, in fact, more than what most religions today stand up for.

Take the definition 'a particular system of faith and worship'. If we judge by our own Buddhist standards which have a dignified seniority of more than two and a half millennia, we have nothing to fight shy of or run away from the word faith. If we pick up our own equivalent for it, it is none other than *saddhā* [Skt. *sraddhā*]. It comes from the basic idea of 'places one's heart in [srad + /dhā]. This means to place trust or confidence in. Buddhism requires this very much of its adherents. 'When the Buddha appears and proclaims his new teaching to the world, many a man places his trust in him': *Taṃ dhammaṃ suṇāti gahapati vā gahapai-putto vā aññatarasmiṃ vā kule paccājāto. So taṃ dhammaṃ sutvā*

Tathāgate saddham paṭilabhati. [D.I. 62 f.].

Whether one uses the word believe here or not, in the light of what we have just quoted above, it is difficult to maintain that the Buddha wanted his followers not to believe him and that he wanted them to check the veracity of what he says and discover the truth for themselves. This we positively declare is misquoting the Kalama Sutta and perverting its contents. Trusting in the teaching and genuinely pursuing its way, and living it as taught therein, one must be experientially awakened to the truth. This is what the Buddha expected of all of us. To be quoting Sanskrit slokas of a much later date, even as quoted by others, in support of anything to the contrary, we would lament, is to miss the 'bus. In our opinion, this kind of commitment through faithful acceptance [that is undoubtedly through saddhā] would be the beginning of religiousness. In Buddhism, it would be the entry into the religion through an avowal of faith in the Buddha and his teaching and that for the complete duration of one's life. [In the Buddhist texts this is referred to as pāṇupetaṃ saraṇaṃ gatā].

This sort of religiousness, in the early stages, is no more than a trusting in the efficacy of the teachings of the Buddha and a more or less emotional commitment to the pursuit of it. This is the very elementary, but we would maintain at the same time, very basic layer of religiousness in Buddhism. If this would remain static and unproductive and continue to be frozen at this level, it provides no more than a comfortable and happier birth in one's next life. The Buddha categorically declares this to be so in the Alagaddupama Sutta where he says that those who have only faith and devotional love towards him would be born in the heavenly worlds [Yesam mayi saddhā-mattam pema-mattaṃ sabbe te sagga-parāyanā ' ti. M.I. 142]. As a must, Buddhist religiousness makes its start with the acceptance of the tisaṇa which is the pre-requisite to being a Buddhist. This is how the Dhammapada puts it.

Yo ca buddhañ ca dhammañ ca saṅghañ ca saraṇaṃ gato. Dhp. v. 190

He who has placed his trust in the Buddha, dhamma and the sangha.

In all instances where Pali texts discuss the factors which either lead to the state of stream-winner [sotāpna], or are characteristic of one who is already a sotāpna, the acceptance of the tisaṇa with firm and penetrative faith [avecca-ppasāda] is insisted on [S.II. 69, S.V. 345 ; A.IV. 406, A.V.183].

What we now wish to take up as religious development is what comes as a sequel to this. Describing a religiously developed Buddhist who has reached the stage of no more decline [avinipāta-dhammo], it is stated that he should also have perfected his assignment of moral development by living to the full, without any blemish of any sort [akkhaṇḍa acchidda asabala akammāsa] the five injunctions of the pañca-sīla. They are also referred to as Ariya-kanta-sīla [See the references made above to the Samyutta and Anguttara Nikayas.]. The significance of their total fulfilment can easily be gauged by the guarantee given that anyone who has perfected them is assured of his or her final liberation in sambodhi [niyato sambodhi-parāyano]. He also earns the guarantee of not falling into any degenerate states of existence or apāyas [catūhi apāyehi ca vippamutto]. He has become a sotāpna. He has virtually pulled himself out of saṃsāra, his number of further births in saṃsāra being restricted to only a seven more. It must also be stressed that this religious development or religious accomplishment is the outcome of unquestionable training in the category of sīla.

If we scan carefully again what we have said above in relation to religious development, we would realize that by now one has already passed though the first five items of the Noble Eightfold Path or Ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo. We firmly hold the view that the progress along the Path is a sequential development, necessarily beginning with a correct [or corrected] vision according to the Buddhist way. The phrase sammā-diṭṭhi-pubbaṅgamā [M.III.72 ff.] or heralded by correct vision, with correct vision as a precursor to everything else that follows is no mere frivolous use. This is not to deny that all along in one's journey on the Path one needs degrees of striving and endeavour [vāyāma] and mindfulness

[sati] to accompany one's pursuit. But well and truly sammā vāyāma and sammā sati in their true placing in the Path are a great deal more than that. They indeed have to be thoroughly completed and perfectly finished products, reaching more than the 99 . 999 % level as was required at NASA in the production of satellites for outer space journeys. It is these which enable humans to propel themselves out of saṃsāra to nirvāṇa.

The last item which we have to take up now for discussion is what we have named spiritual growth. We would immediately identify this, in terms of Buddhist thinking, as the upper reaches of human development [i.e. development possible for humans, while they remain human, through their own human endeavour.]. It is also this phase of development which gets the humans from the mundane to what could correctly be called the higher levels of transcendence, i.e. from lokiya to lokuttara [i.e. in a religious sense, they have really taken off the launch pad of worldly living, their count-down being perfectly done.]. Persons who have reached this stage have verily left the mundane world behind them and are heading for their final goal in nirvāṇa [niyato sambodhi-parāyano], like a satellite that is being put into orbit. What takes place during this interim period is what we would choose to call spiritual growth.

Out of the five saṃsāra- binding factors or fetters called the pañca orambhāgiya - samyojanas, only three are cleared prior to entering the stream or becoming sotāpanna. [Tiṇṇaṃ saṃyojanānam parikkhayā sotāpannā avinipāta-dhammā niyatā sambodhiparāyanā. M.I.226] This indeed is a major jettisoning in the process of Buddhist spiritual ascent. As far as we can see in the early texts, the ascent thereafter is a continuous and steady one, up and up. With seven more possible births left for him, he has to bring about a reduction of the three roots of evil, viz. rāga dosa moha [rāga-dosa-mohānam tanuttā] to reach the stage of one more birth or once-returner [sakadāgāmī]. It is only on the total rejection of all these five gross fetters [orambhāgiya-saṃyojana] that one is declared to be really in the orbit of nirvāṇa and come to be called a non-returner

or anāgāmī [Pañcannaṃ orambhāgiyānaṃ saṃyojanānaṃ parikkhayā opapātikā tattha parinibbāyino anāvattidhammā tasmā lokā. loc.cit.]

In a very specific statement, the Anguttara Nikaya [A.III.423] tells us that no rejection or elimination of the above listed fetters or samyojanas is possible till one has reached the stage of sammā samādhi. This, one must not forget, is the final item of the Noble Eightfold Path [Sammā samādhiṃ aparipūretvā saṃyojanāni pajahissatī 'ti n' etam ṭhānaṃ vijjati.]. And without that there would be no nirvāṇa [Saṃyojanāni appahāya nibbānaṃ sacchikarissatī ' ti n' etam ṭhānaṃ vijjati.]. Thus one should appreciate what spiritual growth in Buddhist sense means and how we could meaningfully relate it to the prescribed ways of religious and spiritual culture in Buddhism in terms of the Noble Eight fold Path and the threefold training in the system of tisso sikkhā.